19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

CHAPTER VII

MEASURES OF TIME AND SPACE. KAREN ASTRONOMY

THE SEASONS AND THE MONTHS

132 ●821 The seasons in Burma are clearly distinguished, the year being divided into two parts by the monsoon, which is the periodic wind of the Southern Asiatic tropics that for six months, between April and November, blows from the southwest off the Indian Ocean, bringing clouds and moisture which produce the never-failing rainy season, as the Karen name for it, "ta su hka," signifies. In November the monsoon shifts to the opposite quarter and the dry season or "ta yaw hka" follows, being again six months in duration. This latter period is subdivided into the cool season or "ta hkü hka," from the middle of November to the first of February, and the hot season or "ta ko hka," during which the sun is waxing hotter and hotter until the beginning of the rains in May. The rainy season has a fairly even temperature with a mean of about eighty degrees, Fahrenheit, while the dry season is marked by variations ranging from about fifty to over one hundred degrees.

805 The Karen term for year is "ni" and for a generation, their longest unit of time, it is "so." Eternity is designated by reduplicating the root "so," for example, "so so," or, with its couplet, "so so xa xa."

According to Karen reckoning, the year is divided into twelve lunar months a month of twenty-nine days alternating with one of thirty. Thus, they have six months of twenty-nine days each, which total one hundred and seventy-four days, while the six intervening months of thirty days each total one hundred and eighty days. These two totals added together give but three hundred and fifty-four days. This arrangement of the calendar necessitated the addition every three years of an extra or intercalary month to make the reckoning of time correct. But the calendar was so poorly kept that confusion arose, and the people do not agree among themselves as to the proper order of the months, or the beginning of the year, or even as to the correct interpretation of the names of the

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

walk without stopping, is a stage, *t' taw leh;* a half-day's journey, *t' n.ä htu leh*; a day's journey, *t' ni leh*, and so on. The Karen may on occasion speak of a month's or a year's journey to very distant places. Another method of designating distances by intervals of time during which physical effort is required is to specify the number of betel chews or quids that would be consumed during the trip. For instance, a Karen is apt to inform one that a certain village is three or four betel chews distant. As it requires from fifteen to twenty minutes to dispose of a quid of betel, the village in question may be estimated as being three or four miles away.

The Karen's Knowledge of Astronomy

It often happens that the Karen find their way through the jungle at night by means of the stars. The more brilliant constellations, called *hsa t' so*, are well known and have their particular names. Of these, the Great Bear *(Hsa k' htaw*, literally the Elephant) and the Southern Cross *(Meh la kù)* are referred to the most frequently, because they signify north and south, respectively. These two constellations were supposed, according to an old legend, to have been brothers, being thought to resemble each other in appearance; but on account of a quarrel they separated and went to the opposite ends of the heavens. Orion is known by the name of the Stealthily Shooting Stars *(Hsa kwa hka)*. A legend relating to the three stars of Orion's belt, which are named *Hsa yo ma* (stars that seized wives), recounts that these stars kidnapped the daughters of the Pleiades, which are regarded as the great ones of the heavens. Later the three culprits were caught and reduced to the degraded position of servants to their parents-in-law. The Archer —Sagittarius of the ancients—is called the Bow-head Star *(Hsa hkli hko*, literally, the head of the bow where it is joined to the barrel of the crossbow). The Pleiades are named *Hsa deu mü*, a term signifying a collection of people closely related to one another; while three stars just east of the Pleiades, which look as though they had broken away from the original group, are called *Deu mü law hpa* (those separated from the company). Three stars south of the Pleiades, which form a triangle, bear the name of the Loom *(Hsa hta hko)*, because the geometrical figure indicated by their positions suggests that enclosed by the floor, which forms the base; the wall, the vertical side; and the inclined warp, the hypothenuse, of the loom in the living-room of a Karen home. It ought to

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

be added that the rising of the morning star, *Hsa tu ghaw*, marks the time for the Karen to get up in the morning; while the appearance of the evening star, *Hsa tu ha*, informs him that the end of the day's work has come and with it the time for going home.

The Karen take note of shooting stars, which they speak of sometimes as *Hsa yu* or flying stars and sometimes as *Hsa hpo tha*, youthful stars. Catching sight of them, people say that they are going to visit the maidens. They give to comets the obvious name of tailed stars, *Hsa meh htaw*, and are not different from other superstitious races in believing that their coming brings calamity. The planets have impressed them as "wandering stars," while they leave the fixed stars without names, except the Pole Star, which they call the Mouse, and a star near the moon, which they describe as the star that draws the moon, *Hsa mo la*. The Milky Way reminds the Karen of their flowering fields of paddy and receives the poetic name of the paddy flower stars, *Hsa bü hpaw*.

Like the Chinese and other Oriental peoples, the Karen attribute the eclipse of the sun or moon to some monster that devours the luminary. The Karen, however, do not discover this monster in the dragon, but believe that dogs do the devouring. According to the legend, a certain personage, who possessed the elixir of life, had four dogs. On one occasion when he was absent from home, the moon descended to earth and stole his wondrous cordial. On his return, finding the elixir had vanished, he constructed a ladder of rice-straw and mounted aloft with his dogs. But just as he was stepping upon the moon his ladder broke, causing him and one of his faithful beasts to fall to earth and lose their lives. The other three dogs were so fortunate as to find secure footing on the firmament. Now and again they become enraged at the recollection of the untimely fate of their master, attack and swallow the moon, and thereby produce the eclipse. One of these faithful dogs is black, and for some unknown reason is unable to swallow the moon entire and so causes only a partial eclipse; but the yellow one devours it completely, and it can be seen shining through his hide, which accounts for the color of the luminary during a total eclipse. On escaping through the animal's bowels, the moon regains its former brightness.[4]

[4] See Chapter XXVIII on Tabu, p. 299.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

"Hkü Te" is to be seen as a rainbow in the west occasionally. At such times, according to one version of the legend, he is lowering a tube through which to drink the liquor provided at wedding-feasts. When a rainbow appears in the west early in the morning, the king of hades is again in the sky, this time setting up a funeral post ("t le") for his children.[6] From this it seems that he has had several offspring, but his wife has never borne him any since their son-in-law thwarted their plot against his life in the remote past. The funeral post is intended to remind men that many persons have died without receiving proper burial ceremonies. Such neglect entails some sort of a calamity. Hence, the Karen are stricken with terror when they observe the rainbow arching the western heavens early in the morning, especially if this sign is accompanied by thunder and earthquake. Under such circumstances they will not go to their work, for it is tabu.[7] If a Karen should point at such a rainbow, he would at once thrust his finger into his navel in order to avoid the loss of the offending member. This act is called "ugh de de."

The people say of the rainbow in the east that at the time "Teu Kweh," wife of "Hkü Te," became the bow of promise in the sky she was pregnant, and, being now separated from the earth, she is seen from time to time in the east going to draw water for herself. The souls of women who die with child are supposed to have no other means of obtaining drink, except from the rainbow divinity. When two rainbows appear in the east, the upper and larger one is her husband, who is visiting with her.

The second group of spirits among the Karen comprises those who have spent some time on earth as human beings, but have not gained entrance into the realm of the dead because they were denied funeral rites either on account of their bad character or on account of their having died by violence. Hence they are doomed to wander about, avenging themselves upon mortals. As they are supposed to be particularly occupied with this mission at nightfall, the Karen think it imprudent to be out during the early evening.

This division consists of three groups of beings. The first are "Th' re ta hka," or ghosts of those who have died violent deaths or have been carried off by epidemics of cholera, smallpox, etc. and could not, therefore, be given proper funeral ceremonies. They are believed to bring violent deaths and epidemics upon mortals, prob-

[6] See Chapter XX on Funeral Customs, p. 200.
[7] See Chapter XXVIII on Tabu, p. 280.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

776 older tribes in the country, but have become the common property of the Karen for several generations back.

773 823 The Titan Atlas of the ancient Greeks, supporting a globe, has his counterpart in "Hsi gu maw ya" or "Maw ya," as he is sometimes called. He is a brother of "Y'wa" and holds the world on his shoulders. When he grows weary, he shifts it from one side to the other and thus causes earthquakes. Sometimes the beetles that feed on the refuse of human beings report to him that they are starving, because there are no more people to supply them with food. This so angers him that he shakes himself and produces a series of earth-tremors. As these phenomena are common in Burma, the Karen seek to quiet them by shouting out: "We are still here. We are still here." Work is tabu during the day on which an earthquake occurs.[11]

776 821 The semiannual change of seasons can not but attract the attention of the people living in Burma. For the Karen a company of demons, the "Law," is responsible for the wet season and another group, the "Hku de," for the dry season. The former, who are sometimes named the "Law hpo" (signifying a company of them), are believed to have cities and dwellings in the upper regions, whence they regulate the rainfall and reveal themselves in the thunder and lightning. The flashes of lightning are nothing less than the flapping of their wings and the thunder is the rattle of their flying shafts against their foes, the "Hku de."

824 776 231 The "Law" are also regarded as the source of the fructifying power in all plants and trees that form their fruits in the wet season. The grain is said to be conceiving when the kernels are developing, and the "Law hpo" are said to be the husbands who bring this about. Their function is to provide the plants, especially the paddy which is heading during the latter part of the rainy season, with the "sgheu" (the life-giving principle), that is, the vaporous substance that comes from the land of the dead and revives all life on the earth.[12] The scarcity of domestic animals among the Karen is attributed to these demons, who are alleged to have raised such a stifling dust by shooting their shafts against the rocks that the creatures took refuge in the jungle and became wild before they could be caught again.

821 776 The enemies of the "Law," the "Hku de," are also demons of the upper air with a human appearance, but no abiding-place. Dur-

[11] See Chapter XXVIII on Tabu, p. 288.
[12] See Chapter XXI on Religious Conceptions, p. 221.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

821
776

ing the period when the "Law" are supreme, these divinities betake themselves to the clefts and fissures of the rocks on Mount "Thaw Thi"; but towards the end of the wet season they begin to gather their forces together for a mortal combat with their opponents. The flashing of spears is seen in the forked lightning, and the force of the blows exchanged is revealed in the roar of the thunder. The "Law hpo" are unable to hold out against the onslaught and withdraw for six months to the fissures and rifts in the rocks from which the "Hku de" came forth. A half-year later the "Law" will vanquish the present victors.

The "P'yo" are demons, usually in the form of dragons or serpents, that blow the water up from the ocean and produce the clouds from which the rain descends. They sometimes take on human form, and in this guise they figure in many Karen tales. They preside over the deep pools of streams, whose flow may otherwise be reduced to the merest trickle. The king of the crocodiles, "Maw law kwi," is said to be one of these demons.

Eclipses, like the clouds, are supposed to be caused by demons; but the eclipse-producing demons were once the dogs of a certain mythical personage who tried unsuccessfully to recover his stolen elixir of life from the moon. These dogs are "K' paw ta thu" and "T' hke mo bak." [13]

776

There are other mythical beings of whom the Karen have more or less vague ideas, for example, the two daughters of "Y'wa" who came to earth in order to improve the condition of men. A prophet discovered their identity and urged the people to build a temple for their worship. The Pwo Karens not only failed to follow this advice, but also disregarded the proprieties so far as to begin pulling out their gold and silver hair ornaments. The goddesses became so disgusted with this rude treatment that they hastened back to their celestial abode, nevermore to be seen by mankind.

776
773

A large group of malevolent beings, much feared by the Karen, are the "Ta na." These are witch-like in their operations, but possess the power to assume almost any form at will in order to harm mortals and are superhuman. They are not to be confused with the Burmese "nats," although they have certain resemblances to them.[14]

[101]

[13] For the tale of the origin of eclipses see Chapter XI on Measures of Time and Space. Karen Astronomy, p. 59.

[14] See "Shwe Yoe" (Sir J. G. Scott), *The Burmese, His Life and Notions*, Chap. XXII, pp. 299, ff.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

cribe the portent to some angry demon, who may at any moment impose a worse calamity upon them if they fail to observe this warning. The tabu of labor, until their fears have subsided, is clearly the precept that would suggest itself to people of deep-seated superstitions. According to Karen legend, the dogs that cause the eclipse of the moon by eating that luminary, are colder than water; while the one that swallows the sun, is hotter than fire. In order to prevent excessive heat or cold and the sickness and death that would follow, the people must abstain from work on the days when an eclipse occurs. The Karen name for the tabu of the eclipse is "ta dü ta yu mü ta yu la." [7]

The portent of the earthquake is produced by the mythical giant, "Hsi Ghu," when the beetle that feeds on the refuse of human beings, tries to deceive him into believing that the human race has disappeared from the earth. In his wrath the giant shifts the planet from one shoulder to the other, and the people shout to him in consternation: "We are still here. We are still here." When, in times past, the giant caught the beetle in this trick, he struck it in the face, and the beetle has had a flat nose ever since. At the time of an earthquake the people refrain from their work for a day, in order to help restore the equilibrum of the planet and to mollify "Hsi Ghu." This practice is called the tabu of the earthquake or "ta dü haw hko hu." [8]

When the apes howl it is a portent that the goddess "Ta La," who dwells on Mount "Thaw Thi," [9] one of the higher peaks of the mountain range separating the Toungoo district from Karenni, is uttering curses, which are greatly feared. In Shwegyin the people ascribe the falling of the leaves in the latter part of February to her imprecations and refrain from work for three days. They believe that if they failed to observe this "ta dü hpa taw" (the long tabu), their crops would be ruined.

The portent of strange sounds in the jungle betokens a combat between two celestial beings, one of whom, "Kwe De," hurls his spear at the other. The whizz of the weapon as it speeds through the air and its thud on striking the ground, evoke the cry, "Htaw law," from those who hear these startling sounds. They must stay at home that day, lest they should be in danger from these mythical spears.

[7] See Chapter VII, p. 84.
[8] See Chapter XXII, p. 220.
[9] See Chapter XXV, p. 262.